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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Golden West College (GWC), in Huntington Beach, California, to investigate the prospective majors and careers chosen by the college's Vietnamese students. Students enrolled in two English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses (N=60) wrote an essay on their ideal job; completed a questionnaire on the importance of different factors in considering a job (e.g., salary, prestige, and nature of work); and participated in formal and informal interviews and a computer-oriented career exploration experience. In addition, enrollment records of 2,160 Vietnamese students attending GWC were examined. Study findings included the following: (1) the largest number of students had not chosen a major yet, with over a third listing their major as general interest and an additional 10% undecided; (2) just under a fourth of the total population reported being in a transfer course; (3) of transfer majors, 27% were studying pre-health, 21% business, 13% biology, 9% computer science, and 4% chemistry; (4) 609 students reported being in a vocational program, with nursing the most popular division, followed by accounting, automotive technology, and business/office administration; (5) the most common reasons given by ESL students for their interest in health care professions were a desire to help people, followed by high salaries, job security, and interest in science; (6) ESL students not in health care, with the exception of three engineering and four education students, were vocational students; (7) over two-thirds of ESL students wanted their families to view their profession as useful; (8) ESL students preferred mental work (67%) to physical work (34%); and (9) ESL students rated as most important job responsibility, gender appropriateness, long-time interest in the profession, salary, and job security. (MAB)

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VIETNAMESE CHOICE OF MAJORS AT GOLDEN WEST COLLEGE

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August 11, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

Golden West College in Huntington Beach is located very near the part of Westminster called Little Saigon due to the large numbers of Vietnamese who started moving there in the mid to late 70s. Consequently, the Vietnamese population at Golden West has grown steadily over the past few years and is now about 15%. The ESL program at Golden West, which has about 1100 students, is almost entirely Vietnamese with only a few people from a variety of other countries.

I have been at Golden West for two years and have often talked informally with my students about their majors. Therefore, when I read Finnan's article (Finnan, 1987) on the Vietnamese refugees in Santa Clara, I was very interested that so many were training to become electronics technicians as my students seemed to be reporting a variety of majors or else were undecided.

Finnan (1987) found that the ethnic community in Santa Clara in the late 70's played a very strong role in occupational choice and in shaping occupational identity. In her conclusion, however, she points the way to change, that because of the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants of different backgrounds, changes in the economy, and because the immigrants are adapting to life in the United States, the Vietnamese would not always choose to be in the same industry.

My research of the Vietnamese at Golden West shows this to be so. Students report going into a variety of majors for a variety of reasons. They are also fairly evenly divided between transfer and vocational courses.

THE STUDY

This summer I taught two ESL classes at Golden West, one a low intermediate class, the other an advanced class, the last ESL class before students are mainstreamed into

regular English classes. There were 30 students in each class. The students are in their late teens to mid-twenties; only five students are in their late thirties to early forties. A few said that they had had about ten years of school before coming to the U.S.; a few completed high school here.

Students wrote an essay on their ideal job, what would they really like to do if they could do anything they wanted. They then completed a questionnaire on the importance of different factors they considered in choosing a job. These included salary, prestige, nature of the work, time spent preparing, and gender-appropriateness. I then interviewed many of the students both formally and informally.

I next had a person come from the career center to speak to the advanced class about the career center, particularly about the computer program Eureka which describes several hundred jobs, what each job consists of, personal characteristics needed for the job, and salary range. Students were then assigned to spend a minimum of half an hour exploring Eureka, write a paragraph describing their experience and give me a printout of their findings.

Finally, I got a printout listed by major from Golden West's admissions and records of the 2160 Vietnamese at the college.

FINDINGS

Overall Vietnamese

The largest number of students report not having chosen a major yet. Over a third list their major as general interest with another ten percent being undecided. I suspect that a great many of these are ESL students who are working exclusively on developing language proficiency.

Just under a fourth of the total population reports being in a transfer course. Over half of these are in science, and half of the science majors are in a pre-health profession of some sort. Twenty percent of the transfer majors are in business.

Just over a fourth of the total population reports being in a vocational course. Nearly a fourth of the vocational group is in nursing followed closely by accounting. In fact the percentage of transfer and vocational students reporting an interest in health or business is very similar. (See Table 1.)

Table 1
Vietnamese Choice of Major at Golden West: Total Population

Transfer Students (528)	*% of transfer students*
Pre-health	27%
Biology	13%
Chemistry	4%
Business	21%
Computer Science	9%

Vocational Students (609)	*% of vocational majors*
Nursing	24%
Accounting	20%
Automotive tech, body, diesel	11%
Bus/Off Administration	8%
Cosmetology	4%

My Students

Response to essays and interviews:

Half of my students reported their ideal job to be medically related. Ten were nurses, seven doctors, four pharmacists, and one each of medical assistant, dental assistant, dentist, and microbiologist. These people were the most altruistic. They reported overwhelmingly that they loved health care because they wanted to help people. Many of them said they wanted to return to Vietnam to help poor people.

Some of this desire to help comes from personal experience with illness or injury. One student had been sick many times as a child and the doctors had helped him. Another said that her father had been saved by a nurse after a car accident. One woman had had a very sick brother and no money for medical treatment. And a man who wants to become a pediatrician said

> In Vietnam, when I was a little kid, there were very few doctors; therefore, children suffered many diseases; they were real sick and some of them died or were crippled because of diseases such as chicken pox or digestive problems that in developed countries are not life threatening. The cries of those children (he had done volunteer work) let me know how important a pediatrician is and gave me the desire to become a pediatrician. I wanted to save those children from any dangerous diseases that might cause them to lose their abilities to work for the future.

Several students said they wanted to help people by teaching preventive health care. They want to help children be healthy, teach people what to eat, how much to exercise, and how to relax. They can also use their professional knowledge to benefit their families and themselves.

The next most common reason given by the health-care group in choosing their profession is money. One said he knew a surgeon with a very high salary. Most, however, are not interested in becoming wealthy, but they do want financial security. In fact one man who has trained as a mechanic wants to retrain as a nurse so that he has insurance for his family. One woman said that in Vietnam, nursing is a low prestige job and very poorly paid. In this country it is different, and the Vietnamese respond to the difference.

Closely related to salary is job security. Some talked about it being easy to find a job and about not being laid off.

The third most common reason given was an interest in science. One said she wanted to do research on cancer and the HIV virus. Others like the chemistry and biology involved. The microbiology major belonged to a science club when she was growing up. A pharmacy major said

> I love to work with chemicals in the lab. With chemicals, I can make different mixtures which can give different reactions. How happy I am when I can form aspirin by myself. Moreover, I really like to read medical books, discover that most plants that I see everyday are useful for our health and it's easy to find and prepare before treatment. For instance, I knew that the core of the *longan's* seed (a tropical fruit) can stanch a wound as well as have different effects on other diseases. I hope that I can do well to make my dream come true.

Other reasons mentioned for choosing health care included liking to work in a

hospital (2 people), short preparation time for nursing or dental assistant (3 people), health care professionals in the family, and respect given members of the profession. Family pressure appeared twice: One woman is becoming a nurse instead of an elementary teacher to please her father. One man said it was his mother's desire that he become a pharmacist. In fact, both of his parents are pharmacists, but he seems to have a healthy interest in pharmacy on his own. He's not just doing it for his parents. Indeed, he sees his parents as an asset: they can help him in his school work and in getting started in a business afterward.

The students not in health care, with the exception of three engineering students and four teachers, are vocational students. Their interests include accounting, automotive technology, photography, jewelry design, architectural drafting, air conditioning, farming, gardening, and being a florist. Some of these are life-long dreams; others are recently decided on.

They have chosen their ideal jobs for reasons as diverse as their majors. Like the health care majors, they are interested in financial security. Half of them reported money being a consideration. Unlike the health care people, only one specifically mentioned wanting to help people. In general, they report liking certain aspects of the profession itself as the reason for choosing it.

The automotive people like cars. Two have loved cars for years, one because he likes to design them, the other because he likes to take them apart and fix them. This student said that when he was young, "everybody always scolded and hit me when they saw me come near to their car because I just disabled them." Others like working with the tools and one began describing some of the things he does on the job. One pragmatist studied to become a mechanic after he had been given a very high estimate on a repair bill.

Some of the engineers also liked learning how things worked. One mentioned "spoiling my parents' watches by trying to find out how they worked." This student also felt that "mechanics is useful for everyday life." One chose civil engineering because he

wants to work outside. Another seems to be heading toward engineering via construction. This man was a jeweler before, but here he swears he wants to go into construction, that that is a good job here because of the money and apparently because he perceives something not quite socially desirable about being a jeweler here. In further informal talks it came out that he is interested in civil engineering because he says that when Vietnam is able to open up and have normal business relations with the West, there will be a lot of building, and as an engineer he would be able to go back and be a part of it. He seems to see construction as a stepping stone to becoming a civil engineer.

The two girls interested in being flight attendants saw the job as challenging, physically easy and somewhat glamorous. They spoke about needing to speak 2-3 languages and the importance of being attractive. These are the only two people who mentioned anything about the physical demands of their job.

Only two women listed accounting as their ideal job although more are majoring in it. For one, working in an office is the attraction, for the other, the fact that she will be working with numbers. This woman also says that her mother is a math teacher, so she can get help whenever she needs it. She also says that there is a perception that "Asians are patient and smart at math, so some companies want to hire Asians for this position."

A few other vocational people have also been thinking about their occupations for a long time. The floral major has been dreaming of her own shop for a very long time. She this major because "everybody is happy when they see the flowers. If you have a party or wedding without some flowers, it may be nothing."

The photographer has brothers in the business, likes the money, likes the art, and likes the pretty models. He also belongs to a Vietnamese artistic photography agency. His parents were at first quite unhappy about his going into photography and insisted for a while that he do something else. After he did the Eureka assignment, he showed them the information that he had got in the career center to convince them that photography was not so bad and has since switched his major back to photography.

A couple of students seem to be indulging a youthful fantasy. One said that as a child she loved to watch movies. Her dream job has come true now because she is working in her sister's video store. She doesn't want to continue this forever, though, and is switching to something more academic, either computers or nursing. Another says that ideally he would work at Disney Land because it is fun, it's a pretty place to work, and he can meet foreign people.

Four or five students mentioned place as an important factor in their choice of a job. For the nurses, it was working in a hospital, for the engineers and the farmer it was working outside, for the Disney Land student it was working in a pretty place.

Two students seem to be completely undecided. Each time they wrote or revised their essay or talked to me they gave me a different job. The jobs they mention are in such diverse fields that I can't see any pattern to their choices.

Students also had a variety of reasons for not majoring in their ideal profession. For the seven who had reported doctor as their ideal job, six are planning to study something else because of preparation time, abilities and interest and language barriers. In fact only two are remaining in health care and are switching to shorter courses of study; one has also expressed an interest in becoming a high school life science teacher. One woman interested in nursing said that she was not smart enough to be a doctor. "Not smart" turned out to be inadequate academic preparation. She and her brother both feel that Vietnamese under 30 are something of a lost generation because of lack of educational opportunity.

Those who expressed an interest in nursing did not change from their stated ideal job to their major with one exception. One woman after looking in Eureka changed to medical technology because she prefers to work alone.

For some, accounting is not their first love, but there are practical reasons for choosing it. One who thought that being a doctor was the ideal job discovered that she did

not like biology and switched to accounting after looking it up in Eureka. Considering that one fifth of the Vietnamese vocational majors are in accounting, there is probably some peer influence at work here as well. Another, whose ideal job is being a volunteer, said that she is moving to accounting because she likes adding machines.

Only one person who expressed an interest in teaching seems to be a little serious about majoring in education, but she is also interested in cosmetology. The others are majoring in diverse areas. Perhaps the initial interest in teaching is due to the respect the Vietnamese give their teachers. Many of students in previous classes have written almost poetically about their teachers and how their teachers gave of themselves for the students. When asked once to give a report on their favorite holiday, almost the entire class reported on teachers' day and the fun they had preparing to honor their teacher. They love their teachers, yet they complain that teachers are not well paid, a reason that a couple of students gave for going into something else. One also said he didn't want to face the threat of being laid off, this from watching L.A. Unified.

Response to questionnaires

In contrast with the Santa Clara Vietnamese (Finnan, 1987), my students are not very interested in working with members of their family or ethnic group. In fact half of them gave working with family members a very low rating, as low in importance as working outside or being able to do their job at home. They also said that having other family members in the same profession was not a factor in their job choice. Only 15% reported this as very important. However, two thirds say they want their families to see their profession as useful.

The factors that they rated as most important are responsibility on the job (creativity, making important decisions, accuracy, variety of tasks), gender-appropriateness, long-time interest in the profession, salary, and job security (see Table 2). The means of the responses to these questions were very similar; however, there was a

wide range among those who felt that these factors were *very* important.

Table 2
Most Important Factors in Choice of Profession

Factor in Job Choice	*% who thought it very important*
Use creativity on job	89%
Job demands accuracy	83%
Make important decisions on job	81%
Long-time interest in profession	80%
Good job for women	77%
Change tasks often	73%
Use facts on job	69%
Job security	68%
Salary	67%
Good job for men	66%

Students responded to whether they had chosen their profession because it was a good job or a woman or a good job for a man. Only women answered the question for women and only men answered the question for men. Significantly more women than men reported choosing a gender-appropriate job, yet only nursing and flight attendants are preponderantly female, a phenomenon not peculiar to Vietnamese culture. However, the role definitions seem to be stronger for women than for men. This is also shown by the fact that only 9% of the women do not consider gender-appropriateness to be a factor as opposed to 28% for the men. This may change. One student said that Vietnamese women are becoming more independent, to the concern of Vietnamese men.

Almost two thirds reported the opinion of family and friends as having a strong influence. Half said that parental encouragement was very important, but a third said it was not a factor.

The students also preferred mental work (67%) to physical work (34%), which agrees with what Finnan found (1987).

A cross-tabulation of the questions showed that those who reported a strong interest in salary also reported a strong interest in prestige both in American and Vietnamese

culture. They are also interested in service and being able to return to Vietnam and help their country. A nursing major said that a good salary for a nurse is not possible in Vietnam, but the student who seriously wants to be a pediatrician and return to Vietnam said that doctors do all right financially.

Finally, two thirds of the men are strongly interested in a gender-appropriate profession as well as salary, while only half of the women are similarly interested. Two women were not interested in a gender-appropriate job but were interested in salary; seven men responded similarly.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

This paper explores the factors that a group of Vietnamese students at Golden West College used in choosing a profession to prepare for. Unlike the Santa Clara Vietnamese, they are not preparing almost exclusively for one occupation but for a range of occupations both professional and vocational. While cultural values seem to play a role in their job choice, the organized ethnic community does not. About half of my students have expressed an interest in health care, which is more than the general Vietnamese population at Golden West who have declared a major. Even so, they cite a variety of reasons for choosing a major, chiefly responsibility, interest in profession, gender-appropriateness, and financial security. They do not feel limited to working within their ethnic community. This move into a variety of professions, Finnan would say, is a sign of their successful adaptation, a trait which is characteristic of the Vietnamese (Finnan, 1987).

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